"K"

A thrilling mystery story about a man who lost his courage and the girl who helped him to find it again

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

CHAPTER XXVI—Continued.

—20—

"When you go away," she said at last, "I want you to remember this. I'm going to do my best, K. You have taught me all I know. All my life I'll have to overlook things; I know that. But, in his way, Palmer cares for me. He will always come back, and perhaps sometime—"

Her voice trailed off. Far ahead of her she saw the years stretching out, marked, not by days and months, but by Palmer's wanderings away, his remorseful returns.

"Do a little more than forgetting," K. said. "Try to care for him, Christine. You did once. And that's your strongest weapon. It's always a woman's strongest weapon. And it wins in the end."

"I shall try, K.," she answered obediently.

But he turned away from the look in her eyes.

Harriet was abroad. She had sent cards from Paris to her "trade." It was an innovation. The two or three people on the Street who received her engraved announcement that she was there, "buying new chic models for the autumn and winter—afternoon frocks, evening gowns, reception dresses, and wraps, from Poiret, Martial et Armand, and others," left the envelopes casually on the parlor table, as if communications from Paris were quite to be expected.

So K. lunched alone, and ate little. Sidney came home at half-past two—came delicately flushed, as if she had hurried, and with a tremulous smile that caught Katie's eyes at once.

"Bless the child!" she said. "There's no need to ask how he is today. You're all one smile."

The smile set just a trifle.

"Katie, someone has written my name out on the street, in chalk. It's with Doctor Wilson's, and it looks so silly. Please go out and sweep it off."

"I'm about crazy with their old chalk. I'll do it after a while."

"Please do it now. I don't want anyone to see it. Is—is Mr. K. upstairs?"

But when she learned that K. was upstairs, oddly enough, she did not go up at once. She stood in the lower hall and listened. Yes, he was there. She could hear him moving about. Her lips parted slightly as she listened.

Christine, looking in from her balcony, saw her there, and, seeing something in her face that she had never suspected, put her hand to her throat.

"Sidney!"

"Oh—hello, Chris."

"Won't you come and sit with me?"

"I haven't much time—that is, I want to speak to K."

"You can see him when he comes down."

Sidney came slowly through the parlor. It occurred to her, all at once, that Christine must see a lot of K., especially now. No doubt he was in and out of the house often. And how pretty Christine was! She was unhappy, too. All that seemed to be necessary to win K.'s attention was to be unhappy enough. Well, surely, in that case—

"How is Max?"

"Still better."

Sidney sat down on the edge of the railing; but she was careful, Christine saw, to face the staircase. There was silence on the balcony. Christine sewed; Sidney sat and swung her feet idly.

"Doctor Ed says Max wants you to give up your training and marry him now."

"I'm not going to marry him at all, Chris."

Upstairs, K.'s door slammed. It was one of his failings that he always slammed doors. Harriet used to be quite disagreeable about it.

Sidney slid from the railing.

"There he is now."

Perhaps, in all her frivolous, selfish life, Christine had never had a bigger moment than the one that followed.

"I'm Not Going to Marry Him at All, Chris."

She could have said nothing, and, in the queer way that life goes, K. might have gone away from the Street as empty of heart as he had come to it.

"Be very good to him, Sidney," she said unsteadily. "He cares so much."

CHAPTER XXVII.

K. was being very dense. For so long had he considered Sidney as unattainable that now his masculine mind, a little weary with much wretchedness, refused to move from its old attitude.

"It was glamour, that was all, K.," said Sidney bravely.

"But, perhaps," said K., "it's just because of that miserable incident with Carlotta. That wasn't the right thing, of course, but Max has told me the story. It was really quite innocent. She fainted in the yard, and—"

Sidney was exasperated.

"Do you want me to marry him, K.?"

K. looked straight ahead.

"I want you to be happy, dear."

They were on the terrace of the White Springs hotel again. K. had ordered dinner, making a great to-do about getting the dishes they both liked. But now that it was there, they were not eating. K. had placed his chair so that his profile was turned toward her. Past K.'s profile Sidney could see the magnolia tree shaped like a heart.

"It seems to me," said Sidney suddenly, "that you are kind to everyone but me, K."

He fairly stammered his astonishment:

"Why, what on earth have I done?"

"You are trying to make me marry Max, aren't you?"

She was very properly ashamed of that, and, when he failed to reply out of sheer inability to think of one that would not say too much, she went hastily to something else: "It is hard for me to realize that you—that you lived a life of your own, a busy life, doing useful things, before you came to us. I wish you would tell me something about yourself. If we're to be friends when you go away,"—she had to stop there, for the lump in her throat—"I'll want to know how to think of you—who your friends are—all that."

He made an effort. He was thinking, of course, that he would be visualizing her, in the hospital, in the little house on its side street, as she looked just then, her eyes like stars, her lips just parted, her hands folded before her on the table.

"I shall be working," he said at last. "So will you."

"Does that mean you won't have time to think of me?"

"I believe I'm stupider than usual tonight. You can think of me as never forgetting you or the Street, working or playing."

Playing! Of course he would not work all the time. And he was going back to his old friends, to people who had always known him, to girls—

He did his best then. He told her of the old family house, built by one of his forebears who had been a king's man until Washington had put the case for the colonies, and who had given himself and his oldest son then to the cause that he made his own. He told of old servants who had wept when he decided to close the house and go away. When she fell silent, he thought he was interesting her.

But a terrible thing was happening to Sidney. Side by side with the wonders he described so casually, she was placing the little house. What an exile it must have been for him! When K., trying his best to interest her and to conceal his own heaviness of spirit, told her of his grandfather's old carriage, she sat back in the shadow.

"Fearful old thing," said K.—"regular cabriolet. I can remember yet the family rows over it."

"When I was a child," said Sidney quietly, "and a carriage drove up and stopped on the Street, I always knew someone had died!"

There was a strained note in her voice. K., whose ear was attuned to every note in her voice, looked at her quickly.

"My great-grandfather," said Sidney in the same tone, "sold chickens at market. He didn't do it himself; but the fact's there, isn't it?"

K. was puzzled.

"What about it?" he said.

"Go on," said Sidney dully. "Tell me about the women you have known, your friends, the ones you liked and the ones who liked you."

K. was rather apologetic.

"I've always been so busy," he confessed. "I know a lot, but I don't think they would interest you. They don't do anything, you know—they travel around and have a good time. They're rather nice to look at, some of them. But when you've said that you've said it all."

Nice to look at! Of course they would be, with nothing else to think of in all the world but of how they looked.

Suddenly Sidney felt very tired. She wanted to go back to the hospital, and turn the key in the door of her little room, and lie with her face down on the bed.

"Would you mind very much if I asked you to take me back?"

He did mind. He had a depressed feeling that the evening had failed. And his depression grew as he brought the car around. He understood, he thought. She was grieving about Max. After all, a girl couldn't care as she had for a year and a half, and then give a man up because of another woman, without a wrench.

"Do you really want to go home, Sidney, or were you tired of sitting there? In that case, we could drive around for an hour or two. I'll not talk if you'd like to be quiet."

Being with K. had become an agony, now that she realized how wrong Christine had been, and that their worlds, hers and K.'s, had only touched for a time. But she was not disposed to skimp as to agony. She would go through with it, every word a stab, if only she might sit beside K. a little longer, might feel the touch of his old gray coat against her arm.

"I'd like to ride, if you don't mind."

K. turned the automobile toward the country roads.

"K."

"Yes?"

"Was there anybody you cared about—any girl—when you left home?"

"I was not in love with anyone, if that's what you mean."

"You knew Max before, didn't you?"

"Yes. You know that."

"If you knew things about him that I should have known, why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't do that, could I? Anyhow—"

"Yes?"

"I thought everything would be all right. It seemed to me that the mere fact of your caring for him—" That was shaky ground; he got off it quickly.

K. was suddenly aware that Sidney was crying. She sat with her head turned away, using her handkerchief

He Almost Crushed Her.

stealthily. He drew the car up beside the road, and in a masterful fashion turned her shoulders about until she faced him.

"Now, tell me about it," he said.

"It's just silliness. I'm—I'm a little bit lonely. Aunt Harriet's in Paris, and with Joe gone and everybody—"

"Aunt Harriet!"

He was properly dazed, for sure.

"And with you going away and never coming back—"

"I'll come back, of course. How's this? I'll promise to come back when you graduate, and send you flowers."

"You won't, K. You'll be back with your old friends. Girls who have been everywhere, and have lovely clothes, and who won't know a T bandage from a figure eight!"

"There will never be anybody in the world like you to me, dear." His voice was husky.

"You are saying that to comfort me."

"To comfort you! I—who have wanted you so long that it hurts even to think about it! Ever since the night I came up the Street, and you were sitting there on the steps—oh, my dear, my dear, if you only cared a little!"

Because he was afraid that he would get out of hand and take her in his arms—which would be idiotic, since, of course, she did not care for him that way—he gripped the steering-wheel. It gave him a curious appearance of making a pathetic appeal to the windshield.

"I have been trying to make you say that all evening!" said Sidney. "I love you so much that— K., won't you take me in your arms?"

Take her in his arms! He almost crushed her. He held her to him and muttered incoherencies until she gasped. It was as if he must make up for long arrears of hopelessness. He held her off a bit to look at her, as if to be sure it was she and no changeling, and as if he wanted her eyes to corroborate her lips. There was no lack of confession in her eyes; they showed him a new heaven and a new earth.

"It was you always, K.," she confessed. "I just didn't realize it. But now, when you look back, don't you see it was?"

He looked back over the months when she had seemed as unattainable as the stars, and he did not see it. He shook his head.

"I never had even a hope."

"Not when I came to you with everything? I brought you all my troubles, and you always helped."

Her eyes filled. She bent down and kissed one of his hands. He was so happy that the foolish little caress made his heart hammer in his ears.

"I think, K., that is how one can always tell when it is the right one, and will be the right one forever and ever. It is the person—one goes to in trouble."

He had no words for that, only little caressing touches of her arm, her hand. Perhaps, without knowing it, he was formulating a sort of prayer that, since there must be troubles, she would always come to him and he would always be able to help her.

And Sidney, too, fell silent. She was recalling the day she became engaged to Max, and the lost feeling she had had. She did not feel the same at all now. She felt as if she had been wandering, and had come home to the arms that were about her. Looking into his steady eyes, she knew that she was safe. She would never wither for him.

Where before she had felt the clutch of inexorable destiny, the woman's fate now she felt only his arms about her, her cheek on his shabby coat.

"I shall love you all my life," she said shakily.

His arms tightened about her.

The little house was dark when they got back to it. The Street, which had heard that Mr. Le Moyne approved of night air, was raising its windows for the night and pinning cheesecloth bags over its curtains to keep them clean.

In the second-story frame room at Mrs. McKee's, the baritone slept heavily, and made divers unvocal sounds. He was hardening his throat, and so slept with a wet towel about it.

Down on the doorstep, Mrs. McKee and Mr. Wagner sat and made love with the aid of a lighted match and the pencil-pad.

The car drew up at the little house. Katie had heard it, and now she came heavily along the hall.

"A woman left this for Mr. K.," she said. "If you think it's a begging letter, you'd better keep it until he's bought his new suit tomorrow. Almost any moment he's likely to bust out."

But it was not a begging letter. K. read it in the hall, with Sidney's shining eyes on him. It began abruptly:

I'm going to Africa with one of my cousins. She is a medical missionary. Perhaps I can work things out there.

If I caused death, I did not mean to. You will think that no excuse, but it is true. In the hospital, when I changed the bottles on Miss Page's medicine tray, I did not care much what happened. But it was different with you.

You dismissed me, you remember. I had been careless about a sponge count. I made up my mind to get back at you.

You remember the packets of gauze sponges we made and used in the operating room? There were twelve to each package. When we counted them as we got them out, we counted by packages. On the night before I left, I went to the operating room and added one sponge every here and there. Out of every dozen packets, perhaps, I fixed one that had thirteen. The next day I went away.

Then I was terrified. I was so frightened that I went down sick over it. When I got better, I heard you had lost a case and the cause was being whispered about. I almost died of terror. Then I left the city. I couldn't stand it. I was afraid to read a newspaper.

I am not going to sign this letter. You know who it is from. And I am not going to ask your forgiveness, or anything of that sort. I don't expect it. But one thing hurts me more than anything else, the other night. You said you'd lost your faith in yourself. This is to tell you that you need not. And you said something else—that anyone can "come back." I wonder!

K. stood in the hall of the little house with the letter in his hand. Just beyond on the doorstep was Sidney, waiting for him. His arms were still warm from the touch of her. Beyond lay the Street, and beyond that lay the world and a man's work to do. Work, and faith to do it, a good woman's hand in the dark, a Providence that made things right in the end.

"Are you coming, K.?"

"Coming," he said. And, when he was beside her, his long figure folded to the short measure of the step, he stooped humbly and kissed the hem of her soft white dress.

(THE END.)

RAILROAD HAS SPOILED TOWN

Sterzing, in the Austrian Tyrol, No Longer the Pleasant Halting Place That It Was Years Ago.

Sterzing is a town of the passer-by, a hamlet marked by the footprints of 20 centuries of voyaging great men. The little town lies in the Austrian Tyrol, on that railroad which in peace times runs southward from Innsbruck to Verona. Nowadays few voyagers stop at Sterzing, for the railroad has stretched a day's journey immensely and thereby deprived the traveler of most of those one-night halting places that were one of the intimate delights of old-time travel, if one may believe the records.

Sterzing was such a halting place on the old coach journey from Germany over the Alps to Italy. Even today it impresses you as a city that might best be described as one great inn. It is a typically German inn, in spite of lying as it does on the Italian slope of the mountains. Its looks and its habits and its people are German, though all the influences of Italian art and Italian thought flourish only a few hours away. You may pitch a chip into the Brenner river in the morning, and, if it escapes the perils of navigation, it will be in Italy before sundown.—Chicago Daily News.

Don't Be a Grouch.

"I don't think I am a grouch, or an old snarleyow, but if I am I hope someone will go and tell me now. And if I am a snarleyow, and they can prove it, too, I want to know right away, for I've a stunt to do. I want to go down here and get a rope and get a rock and tie the blamed thing around my neck and then fall off the dock. For what I said when I was young is just as true today, you have no right to live along unless you've learned the way. So if I am a crabbed guy I want to quit the scene, I want the old fool-killers' club to come down on my bean.—Houston Post.

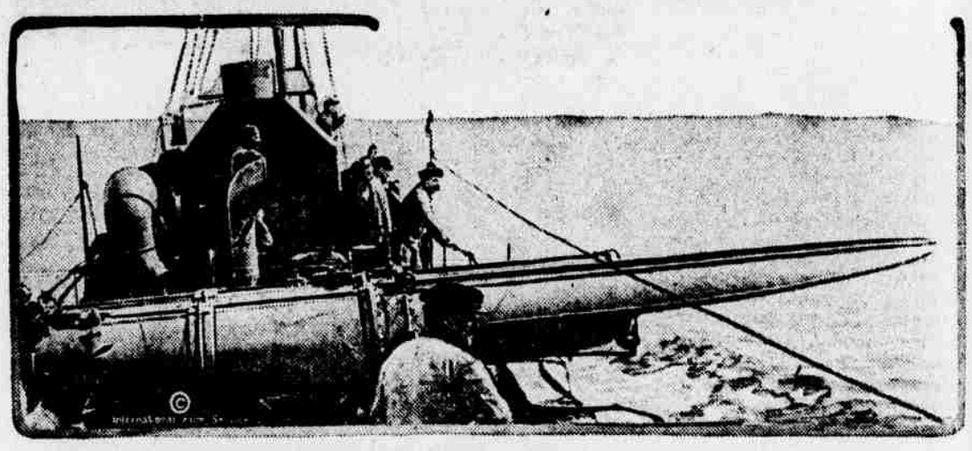
The Nearest Duty.

Let him who gropes painfully in darkness or uncertain light, and prays vehemently that the dawn may ripen into day, lay this precept well to heart: "Do the duty which lies nearest thee, which thou knowest to be a duty! Thy second duty will already have become clearer."—Carlyle.

South Carolina has a new law designed to make it easy for tenant farmers to become proprietors.

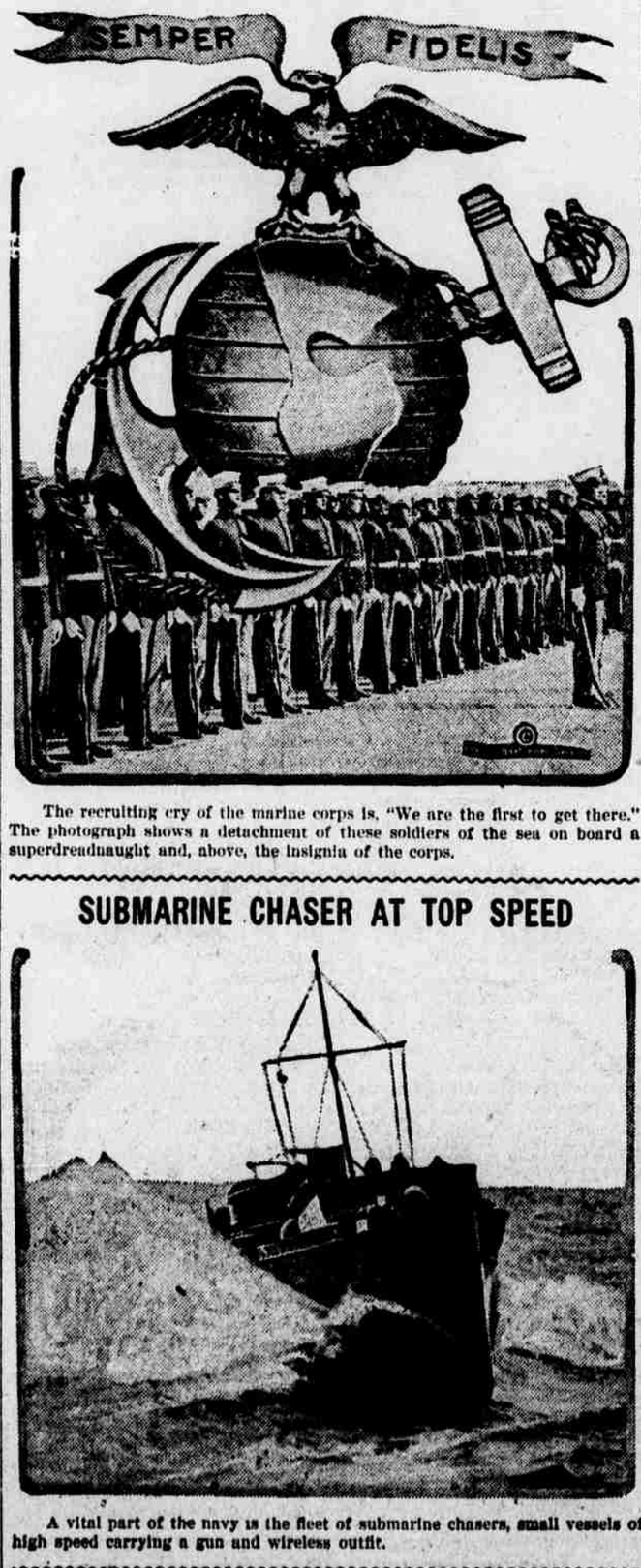
1—Camp of the National Service school, the military preparedness camp for women, conducted by the Navy league near Washington. 2—Miss Edwardina Lavole, bugler of the First field artillery band of the New York National Guard. 3—Loading ammunition on the light railway that follows closely the advance of the allies in France. 4—Raymon Valdes, president of Panama, whose country is standing by the United States.

FRENCH GUNNERS WATCHING FOR A SUBMARINE



Gunners on a French destroyer photographed as they were watching for a German submarine whose location had been signaled by an aviator.

THEY ARE THE FIRST TO GET THERE



The recruiting cry of the marine corps is, "We are the first to get there." The photograph shows a detachment of these soldiers of the sea on board a superdreadnaught and, above, the insignia of the corps.

SUBMARINE CHASER AT TOP SPEED

A vital part of the navy is the fleet of submarine chasers, small vessels of high speed carrying a gun and wireless outfit.

Flowers.

Flowers are perhaps the most effective of the many little "finishing touches" necessary to an attractive home. There are thousands of persons with beautiful houses, costly furnishings, perhaps, artistically and skillfully arranged by the hands of a clever decorator, but it takes the little finishing touches, the seemingly unimportant tiny things, done by the woman who loves and exists for her home and expresses her soul in her surroundings to make the house lovable.

Patience.

Every man, worthy of the name, should know how to possess his soul—bearing with patience those things which energy cannot change, and the evil of which impatience only increases. This patient possession of one's soul stretches far and wide; it covers all the domain of social life—all the tract of inter-relation with others. It means patience with every kind of outside annoyance that cannot be removed by vigorous exertion.—Mrs. Lynn Linton.

CAPT. G. H. BURRAGE

Capt. G. H. Burrage of Winchester, Mass., has been assigned to the battleship Nebraska.

CUTTING THE BANDAGES

Miss Helen Reed, a Red Cross worker, using an electrical machine for cutting cloth into bandages.

Would the Bear Wait?

When the late Samuel W. Pennypacker was governor of Pennsylvania he wrote a very brief but highly interesting veto message. The legislature passed a bill making it illegal to kill a bear with anything but a gun and at any time but the month of November. "Suppose," wrote the governor in his veto, "a man chopping wood in July were attacked by a bear. Would the bear wait until November before it killed the man or permit him to go home and get his gun?"—Philadelphia Public Ledger.